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SUBJECT: PUTTALAM'S "OLD" IDPS: A STABLE, IF LEAN, EXISTENCE

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¶1. (SBU) On December 10-11, Embassy officials visited the Puttalam district and held meetings with senior government officials, international organizations, civil-society, and NGOs to assess the post-war humanitarian conditions and resettlement options of Muslim internally displaced persons (IDPs) and their relations with the surrounding Muslim community. Embassy officials observed that the post-war situation for Puttalam Muslims included a marked disconnect from and displeasure with the central government in Colombo, high unemployment and poverty, and host community dissatisfaction with NGOs, contributing to a strained relationship between IDPs and locals. The Puttalam interlocutors from the old "IDP" and host community emphasized some key obstacles for their return for local integration. END SUMMARY.

RESETTLEMENT

¶2. (SBU) In October 1990, 72,000 Muslims in the Northern Province were forcibly expelled by the LTTE. In many places, the LTTE gave the Muslims only two to 48 hours to leave or face death. The government security forces stationed in the North reportedly did not attempt to prevent the ethnic cleansing. According to Government Agent (GA) of the Secretariat of Northern Displaced Muslims (SNDM) Kingsley Fernando, 18,985 families consisting of 77,335 individual Muslims, were still living in 141 open camps called "welfare villages," with the vast majority in four divisions of Kalpitya, Puttalam, Mundal, and Wanathavilluwa. In an August 2009 government survey, 95 percent of the IDPs reported wanting to return to their original homes in the North. In the GA's opinion, however, only about 50 percent of the current IDP population would actually return. The consensus among the government, civil society, and NGO representatives with whom we met was that the first generation was likely to return to their original homes while the second generation had established roots in the host community where they were raised. Current SNDM figures show 791 families have already resettled in Mannar and Killinochchi districts, of which 758 families went to Museli division, 32 families resettled in Nanata division and one family went to the town of Mannar. After an initial assessment, returnees found homes destroyed and little infrastructure. Fear of mines prevented many from returning to areas in Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, and Jaffna.

13. (SBU) Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief's Acting Commissioner Fahry assisted families in the resettlement process. The process involved SNDM notifying the destination district and the GA, who then assisted the family in claiming their land. NGOs noted that old IDP returnees had received the returns package of Rs 25,000 in cash, roofing sheets and 6 months of rations, essentially the same package as new returning IDPs in the North had received. (NOTE: Mass scale IDP returns would dramatically impact the limited donor and government resources. END NOTE.) Land disputes were resolved based on parties' documents or government records when available. According to the GA, the survey ministry had maps with demarcation of property that helped resolve land disputes. If another person occupied a returnee's land and no documents were available, the returnee would be granted government land. According to the Puttalam citizens group, this was easier in Mannar where there was plenty of land available, but more difficult in Jaffna. In speaking with the IDPs in the welfare villages, it appeared that women who were single breadwinners in families were reluctant to return home, not knowing what was in store for them upon return. NGO workers reported some harassment of women by government forces in areas of return.

LIFE IN WELFARE VILLAGES: POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

14. (SBU) The 2006 UNHCR survey noted 99 percent of the displaced community to be Muslims. There were no restrictions on freedom of movement among the IDPs in the welfare villages. The IDPs were 100 percent Sunni Muslims, 90 percent who whom followed the Shafi School of law and 10 percent who followed the Hanafi School. The GA estimated that 80-90 percent of IDPs had bought land in the welfare villages and in the Puttalam Township. Communities reestablished themselves in the village under the same social structure of their

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communities in the North, often naming their "camps" after their original villages. The host community and the GA estimated that 30-40 percent of businesses in Puttalam area were IDP-owned. In 2007, under the implementation of the Ministry of Resettlement, the World Bank approved the Puttalam housing project (PHP) to construct 4352 new houses and 2232 partially completed houses in the welfare villages and 600 temporary houses for non-IDPs. Each qualifying family had to meet the project criteria for receiving the funding. When completed, the project would help upgrade the IDP community that contributes to the socio-economic integration of IDPs and non-IDPs.

15. (SBU) Unemployment was high amongst the IDPs. A majority of the IDPs worked as day laborers; men earned Rs 500-600/ day (\$5-6) while women earned Rs 350/day (\$3-4) mostly working in fields. UNHCR 2006 survey reflected 61 percent unemployment, of which 46 percent were women and 14 percent men. Some of the IDPs sought work in the Middle East through employment agencies. Recruiters often received a finder's fee for bringing women to the agencies. There was no oversight of the employment agencies and no record of transactions, often leading to shady deals especially in the case of women. The IDPs' legal status as Northern Province residents made them ineligible for government jobs, including teaching and other service provisions in Puttalam. Since government business was conducted in Sinhala, Tamil-speaking IDPs faced language barriers to employment and services. Employment assistance services and development services were provided by NGOs such as the Community Trust Fund, Rural Development Foundation, Norwegian Refugee Council, UNHCR, UNICEF, and FORUT in the welfare villages.

OTHER RESOURCES ALSO LIMITED

16. (SBU) Access to other Puttalam resources was also limited. Educational services were available to the IDPs with Tamil and Sinhala children attending school together. While the government schools were free, many in the welfare villages were unable to send their children to school because of their lack of transportation funds and cost of school materials. Less than 30 percent of Puttalam high school graduates continued on to the University. IDP children had access to Islamic studies at the local welfare village

mosques. Classes were held for boys and girls who studied the Koran in Arabic. A government hospital was available for services and the nearest health clinic was two kilometer from the villages. A mobile clinic for assessing childcare, such as weighing babies, made its rounds sporadically. The GSL provided electricity and water systems to the IDP villages, but residents paid for connections to their homes. Nearly everyone in the welfare villages had electrical hook-ups. Electricity costs Rs 300-400 (\$3-4) per month, "more if you had a rice cooker." The GSL supplied water to all the welfare villages, but hook-up for each house required a one-time Rs 10,000 connection fee. (NOTE: This was the same amount required of the host community. END NOTE.)

17. (SBU) Since 1990, IDPs had received dry rations through the SNDM based on their family size when they originally arrived in the area. A family of five received dry rations worth Rs 1260 (\$12-13), a family of four Rs 1008 (\$10), a family of three Rs 840 (\$8-9) and a single person Rs 336 (\$3-4) per month. No adjustment for inflation had resulted in the quantity of food markedly declining over the years. The SNDM had requested an increase from the Ministry of Resettlement, but no policy decision had been made. Until 2006, the World Food Program had provided the rations; the Ministry of Resettlement had undertaken the task since then and had spent Rs. 97 million every six months for the supply of food to the IDPs. A National Cooperative distributed the rations that included rice, sugar, soap, and lentils. Delays in the cooperative receiving funds from the Ministry of Resettlement often delayed purchases and the distribution of rations. One welfare village reported not receiving rations for four months, and eating only once a day with help from family and friends. According to the GA, only first generation IDPs were eligible for the rations. Some low-income second-generation

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IDPs were approved on a case-by-case basis by local authorities. Acting Commissioner Fahry noted that there was abuse of the ration program. Sometimes the older generation returning to Jaffna to their homes left ration documents with the younger generation to continue collecting rations. There were reports of ration documents sold for cash.

POLITICAL POWER, LIMITED RESOURCES: "US VS THEM"

18. (SBU) The influx of the IDPs in the Puttalam district had put pressures on the host community's limited resources. Tensions were high because of educational quotas for universities, land for agriculture, competition for fishing rights in the lagoon, jobs, and businesses. IDPs increased competition for university slots because they were considered part of the Puttalam application pool rather than the Northern Provincial educational pool. IDPs and the local community remarked that while IDPs voted in Puttalam, their votes counted in the Northern Province. This led to local government officials discounting their concerns, effectively giving them no local representation. The host community argued that IDPs had political power on a national level because of their connection to Minister Bathiudeen from the Ministry of Resettlement (a Muslim IDP himself). While the host community benefitted from IDP community projects like schools and playgrounds, services to IDPs were prioritized. The host community complained that of the 22 local NGOs, 18 were IDP-focused, and the four that focused on the host community lacked funding. The World Bank project had also raised tensions among the community members. The PHP allocated only 10 percent of homes to the host community while 90 percent of the benefits went to the IDPs. Host community members were resentful of the UN and INGO mandate of assistance to IDPs only. The host community expressed their frustrations that many of the affluent IDP businesses only hired IDPs, and IDPs only patronized other IDP businesses, thus cutting locals out of profits.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) The government's aid to the "old IDPs" has created a dependent community that is leery of giving up their IDP status and losing the benefits. While there has been an international outcry for the resettlement of Tamil IDPs, the issue of the Muslim IDP

resettlement and economic well-being goes largely unmonitored. The Muslim community has been critical of this and some have remarked, "there were no generous aid packages to them (Muslims). Perhaps, in their eyes, these Muslim refugees were not human beings." There is a clear disconnect between the Muslims (host and old IDPs) and the Muslim political leadership in Colombo. Surprisingly, neither the GA nor the Acting Commissioner were aware of President Rajapaksa's recent announcement to allow Muslims to return to the North. While Minister Bathiudeen has a stake in the displaced people maintaining their IDP status for his voter base, the local Muslim politicians would benefit from IDPs integrating and becoming Puttalam voters. On the other hand, given that the Muslims were originally only 40 percent of the Puttalam district population, if the old IDPs do not return home but were integrated in the Puttalam district, the total Muslim representation would become a concern to non-Muslim Puttalam politicians.

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